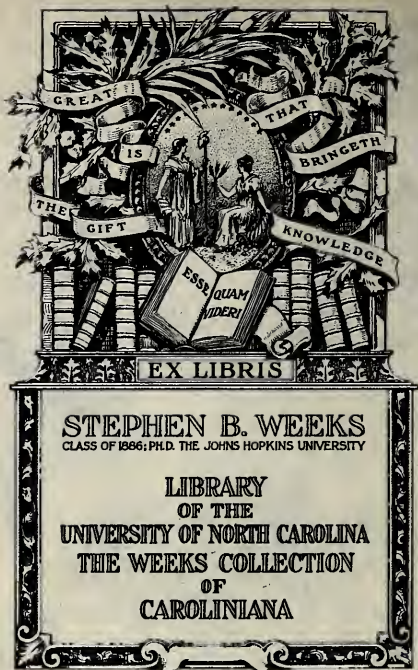


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Hero of Fort Fisher

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HERO OF FORT FISHER

General Curtis' Address Before the
Historical Society.

SUBJECT WAS 'FORT FISHER.'

Many Grand Army Men and Historical Members Hear the General on a Subject on Which He is Well Qualified to Speak—Extracts From Official Documents.

General N. M. Curtis of Washington lectured before the Oneida historical society last evening on a subject of which he is eminently qualified to speak, "Fort Fisher." The auditorium of the Munson-Williams memorial was filled with grand army men and their wives, and members of the society. General Curtis was greeted with hearty applause as he entered the hall with Thomas R. Proctor, the vice president of the society. Mr. Proctor introduced General Curtis with these words: "Ladies and Gentlemen—It requires but four words to introduce the lecturer of this evening, 'the hero of Fort Fisher.'"

General Curtis spoke for an hour and a half, illustrating his lecture by a large wall map. His graphic story of the battle in which he bore so prominent a part aroused the patriotism of his audience. He said:

"At the first interview between General Grant and Admiral Porter, the admiral objected to the selection of General Butler to command the army forces. At this interview Weitzel was agreed upon. General Grant directed General Butler to send General Weitzel down to reconnoiter Fort Fisher. General Grant states in forwarding Butler's report of Jan. 3, 1865, that "my orders to General Butler to prepare it were given verbally, to avoid publicity of the time of sailing and destination." Dec. 6, 1864, in writing instructions to General Butler General Grant stated: "The first object of the expedition under General Weitzel is to close to the enemy the port of Wilmington. * * * The object of the expedition will be gained by effecting a landing on the mainland between Cape Fear river and the Atlantic north of the north entrance to the river. Should such landing be effected whilst the enemy still hold Fort Fisher and the batteries guarding the entrance to the river, then the troops should entrench themselves and by co-operating with

the navy effect the reduction and capture of those pieces." General Butler, at 10 p. m., Dec. 24, 1864, wrote Admiral Porter:

"We will endeavor to effect a landing above Flag Pond hill battery, between that and Half Moon, at such an hour as may be fixed upon by consultation between yourself and General Weitzel, who will have command of the troops, and who will meet you at any hour you choose to arrange details. * * * I design, in the first place, to send on shore a party of reconnoissance sufficiently strong to hold the landing if we gain a good hold, and then to land as rapidly as possible our whole force, and if from the reconnoissance it is deemed practicable to attempt an assault on Fort Fisher the assault will be made."

Under the plans agreed upon between General Weitzel and Admiral Porter, I was detailed to land with 500 of my brigade, by row boats supplied by the navy in charge of Lieutenant (now commodore) Farquhar. Having got my men in the boats formed in line with a launch carrying a howitzer on each flank, I directed them to maintain their alignment and reach the shore as soon as possible; at the same time requesting the lieutenant to put me on the beach in advance of the line. About this time I saw a boat pass the right of my line headed for the shore. I asked that I be landed first. My crew were the better oarsmen and I landed and carried Captain Glisson's flag, taken from the gig, to the sand dunes before our competitors reached the shore. The boat brought General Weitzel. He congratulated me on winning the race and said, "I had offered \$1,000 to beat your boat." I said the difference between a boat crew from a transport and one from a United States man-of-war was more than one thousand dollars, and that all I had to do was to request the officer in charge to land me first. As soon as the troops landed and formed in line, pickets were thrown out to the north and west, and flankers as we moved down the beach. Soon after we started Captain Koons, company A, 42d North Carolina infantry, occupying Flag Pond battery, half a mile south of our landing, raised a white flag, indicating his desire to surrender, and his command of 67 men and officers were taken off by boats from the naval vessels. The log book of the Santiago de Cuba, of Dec. 25, 1864, states that we took possession of Flag Pond battery at 3 p. m. We then marched down the beach about one mile south of Flag Pond battery, and halted. General Weitzel made a careful examination of Fort Fisher and its surroundings and stated the fort was not injured by the navy fire—only one gun displaced—and requested me to take his glass and report how I found it. I looked and agreed with him as to the physical condition of the work. We were at that time about one and a half miles north of Fort Fisher. General Weitzel says in his report: "I proceeded in person, accompanying the 142d New York, to within about 800 yards of Fort Fisher, a point from which I had a good view of the work. From what I saw there and before that time, and from what I had heard from what I considered reliable sources, I believe the work to be a square bastioned work; it has a high relief, a wide and deep ditch, excepting on the sea front, a glacis, has casemates and bomb-proofs sufficiently large to hold its garrison. * * * I returned, as directed, to the major general commanding, found him on the gun-boat Chamberlain within easy range and good view of the work, and frankly reported

to him that it would be butchery to order an assault on that work under the circumstances. After examining it himself carefully, he came to the same conclusion, and directed the troops to be re-embarked."

General Weitzel makes no mention of the orders given me when he left to report to General Butler, but in his testimony before committee on the conduct of the war, page 76, he says: "After I had made a reconnaissance, I returned, as I had been directed, to General Butler, to make my report. I directed General Curtis to remain in command, and to push on towards the work until he was stopped, and to find out what was there; and if he discovered anything new to immediately report it to General Butler, and I left a signal sergeant with him for that purpose."

It was probably about 3:20 p. m. when General Weitzel left me to report to General Butler. The signal sergeant did not remain with me. In General Butler's testimony before the committee on the conduct of the war, page 23, he says: "General Weitzel stated that he thought it was impossible to assault the fort successfully. Being unwilling to leave the matter without trying, and seeing from the state of the weather that it must be an assault or nothing, I said to Colonel Comstock, who was on board with me, 'Jump into a boat with General Weitzel, (Colonel R. H. Jackson, not General Weitzel, went with Colonel Comstock,) pull ashore, and examine with General Weitzel, (Colonel Jackson;) and report to me if an assault is feasible; to me it does not look possible, but I am unwilling to give up.' I had a vivid perception of the future which has overtaken me. They went on shore. The surf had begun to rise, so that they got very wet in landing. At the same time General Graham reported to me. He said, 'General, you have got either to provide for those troops to-night on shore some way, or get them off, because it is getting so rough that we can not land much longer.' * * * Considering a few moments, I determined the course of action that should govern me."

All this must have occurred before 4 p. m. Captain James Alden, commanding the Brooklyn, reports: * * * "At 4 o'clock, just two hours after the landing commenced, the general commanding came alongside of this ship and said: 'It has become necessary to re-embark the troops; will you send your boats to assist?' You can judge of my surprise at the turn affairs had taken, for at that moment everything seemed propitious, the bombardment was at its height, little or no surf on the beach, and no serious indications of bad weather."

The reconnoitering party effected a landing at 2:10 p. m., and was followed by all the second division and one regiment of colored troops, (about 4,000 men,) before the order to re-embark was given by General Butler. All remained on the beach near the point of landing excepting a portion of the first brigade. At four o'clock, when the order was given to re-embark a detachment of the reconnoitering party had reached Craig's Landing, and Lieutenant Simpson cut the telegraph wire, thus breaking communication between the fort and Wilmington. The skirmish line was approaching the fort, and less than half a mile away. At 4:20, when a navy shot cut the garrison flagstaff, the skirmishers were at the stockade, and Lieutenant Walling in command, went thro the ditch, stockade, up the parapet, and brought the flag away. He presented it to me at the bank of the ditch. I

immediately sent an officer to the reserve and directed them to immediately come down to the earthwork at Cape Fear river about 800 yards north of the flank of the fort, and then go up the beach and report to General Butler that we had cut the telegraph line, breaking communication with Wilmington, and captured the garrison flag, which I was about to take to the beach and exhibit to the navy that they might direct their fire in support of any subsequent movements we should make. Two musket shots were directed at the party carrying the flag to the beach. They went over us. Quite high shots you can see, in order to go over the head of one of the party. After reaching the beach, and seeing no movement on the part of the reserve, I went up to ascertain the failure to comply with my order to advance, and was then informed that a short time before the receipt of my order an order had been received from the commanding general to retire up the beach, and that it had been sent to me at the western end of the line, and in view of the fact that it was an order from my superior, my own order, being directly contrary to that from headquarters, had been held in abeyance until I should be made aware of the nature of the order of the commanding general. This order was probably received about the time that the flag was captured. Notwithstanding the order to retire, I took such of my brigade as had come up, and moved down to the earthwork before mentioned, some 800 yards from the fort, sending the 117th regiment up the Wilmington road running near the Cape Fear river with orders to advance a mile if they could do so without resistance from the enemy, and to establish a picket line to extend from the Cape Fear river across the peninsula to the flankers we had already thrown out when we marched down the beach. In making this movement, Captain Stevens, with two men, went in advance of the regiment as skirmishers to prevent its falling into an ambush, and when they had advanced a little to the north of Craig's Landing Major Reese of the North Carolina junior reserves stepped in to the road, threw up his hands and surrendered before a shot had been fired or the regiment had arrived in sight. A portion of his command escaped, but some 200 and odd officers and men were brought in and finally sent north. The regiment at the same time captured two guns of a light battery and six caissons. A courier carrying a message out of the fort was shot and his horse taken only a short distance from the parapet. At the conclusion of these operations a second order was received directing me to retire. To this I sent in reply a communication stating what had been accomplished subsequently to my first report, stating there was no enemy in sight and that no resistance had been offered beyond the two musket shots fired at the party carrying the flag to the beach, and I should hold his order in obedience until the commanding general could become acquainted with the defenseless condition of the work. Soon after this, at dark, Colonel Comstock and Colonel Jackson came to this out-work, closely followed by the division commander. To them a detailed statement was made of the operations of the reconnoitering party up to the time of their arrival, and they were requested to notify General Butler, that in my opinion the fort could be successfully assaulted the next morning, one hour after the navy should open fire. Neither of these officers would assume any responsibility as to my failure to comply with the orders to retire,

but General Amcs stated, "If I felt confident that I could capture the fort I ought to make the attempt with the men I had at my disposal." I stated that it was then dark and the navy was retiring, and as it retired the enemy would come out from their bombproofs and man their guns and would slaughter me should I then attempt an assault without the protection of the naval fire, and that I could not assault until after daylight and the navy should keep the enemy in their bombproofs. These officers returned. Colonel Comstock, as I believed from what he said, intended to advise General Butler to prepare for an assault the next morning. One hour after this I received the third order to retire, which I complied with by withdrawing my skirmishers from the fort and pickets from the Wilmington road, and with our prisoners marched up the beach to the point of debarkation. There I found that the troops which had landed and remained on the beach in that vicinity had all re-embarked. I got off a portion of my command and the commissioned confederate officers, when the surf became so high the boats could not live, as stated by those in command of them. Between six and seven hundred of my command and two hundred and thirty prisoners remained on shore until we were taken off on the following Tuesday afternoon.

From an examination of the chronological order of events, as they transpired from 2:10 p. m. until 4 p. m., it will be seen that about two-thirds of General Butler's command effected a landing on the beach, and that no report from the reconnoitering party, which had been sent to the front with orders "to report anything that might be discovered to General Butler," had been received by him. He had acted solely on his own judgment and the advice of General Weitzel not to assault based on the information obtained from the observation made of the fort at a distance of a mile and a half—a distance so great that he could not see its formation, as is evidenced by his report, in which he states that "it was a square bastioned fort, with casemate and a glacis." It really had one bastion, no casemate and no glacis. General Butler did not wait to receive a report of the discoveries made by the reconnoitering party, and failed to wait for a report from Colonel Comstock and Colonel Jackson, who were sent ashore to specially ascertain if in their opinion "an assault was feasible." The opinion of General Weitzel not to assault the work was made in absolute ignorance of the orders to General Butler, wherein it was stated "the object of the expedition will be gained by effecting a landing on the mainland between Cape Fear river and the Atlantic north of the north entrance to the river."

General Butler telegraphed at 8 p. m., Dec. 27, 1864, to General Grant, announcing the return of the expedition to Fortress Monroe, and gave a brief summary of the events attending it. At 5:30 p. m., Dec. 28, President Lincoln telegraphed General Grant as follows: "If there be no objections, please tell me what you now understand of the Wilmington expedition, present and prospective." To which General Grant replied, at 8:30 p. m.: "The Wilmington expedition has proven a gross and culpable failure. Many of the troops are now back here. Delays and free talk of the object of the expedition enabled the enemy to move troops to Wilmington to defeat it. After the expedition sailed from Fortress Monroe three days of fine weather was squandered, during which the enemy was

without a force to protect himself. Who is to blame I hope will be known."

The morning of the 29th of December, the transport upon which I returned from Fort Fisher dropped anchor in Hampton Roads. I went on shore for breakfast and was sent for by General Grant and questioned as to what I saw and did after landing at Fort Fisher. I gave him a detailed account of the operations of my command while on shore, and a description of the fort. He stated that my description differed from that of other officers, who reported "it as a square bastioned work with casemates and glacis, and its exterior sides averaging about 200 yards." I replied that I had been within a few yards of it and knew it had no casemates, no glacis and only one bastioned angle, and that its land face was about half a mile long, and its sea face over a mile long; no parapet on the south or west. He said the expedition ought not to have failed and that he might desire to hear further from me. I returned to my ship to wait for other transports to come in before we should proceed up the river.

In a few hours after I left General Grant I received a telegram from General Weitzel to report at once to his headquarters. I went up in advance of my troops, and when I reached General Weitzel's headquarters he said he had sent for me in obedience to a telegram from General Grant, who wanted a detailed account of what I and the officers of my command who were nearest the fort had seen. I sent for Captain Walling, 142d New York, who brought the garrison flag from the fort. Lieutenant George Simpson, 142d New York, who cut the telegraph wire, and Lieutenant G. W. Reesc, 117th New York, John W. White, James Spring and Henry Blair of the 142d New York volunteers, who were on on the skirmish line. The statements of these officers and men were taken down and sent to General Grant, thro Colonel Comstock. General Grant forwarded them to the secretary of war "with the request that these papers be filed with Major General Butler's report of the expedition against Fort Fisher, N. C., as statements appended to said report by me. I should have appended them when I forwarded the report, but Lieutenant Colonel Comstock, aide-de-camp, to whom they were made, was absent on the second expedition against the fort and had them with him. These statements of the officers and men named were reduced to writing immediately after the return of the unsuccessful expedition against Fort Fisher, and were handed to Colonel Comstock about the 2d day of January, 1865. General Butler, before ordering the re-embarkation and return of the expedition he assumed to command, might have had within information, and it was his duty, before giving such orders, to have known the results of the reconnoissance, which could have been most satisfactorily learned from those most in advance."

These quotations from the official records plainly show who it was that disregarded the instructions of General Grant and was responsible for the failure of the first expedition.

Some careless readers have asserted that the inquiry ordered by the senate, Jan. 12, 1865, "Resolved, That the committee on the conduct of the war be directed to inquire into the causes of the failure of the late expedition against Wilmington, North Carolina, and to report the facts to the senate." fully acquits General Butler of the responsibility charged by General Grant.

A careful reading of the evidence taken by that committee will show that the order of the senate was not complied with. The inquiry was made not to ascertain the causes of the failure, but as to the propriety of assaulting the fort, as the findings of the committee clearly show: "In conclusion, your committee would say, from all the testimony before them, that the determination of General Butler not to assault the fort seems to have been fully justified by all the facts and circumstances then known or afterwards ascertained."

The result of the second expedition fully corroborates the correctness of the description of the works on Federal Point given by myself and members of my command, who were the only persons within 800 yards of the main work, and justified our opinion that the fort could have been captured on the first expedition had the commanding general complied with General Grant's orders and intelligently attempted to have carried out the plans he

announced to Admiral Porter the night before the landing. The reasons given for refusing to carry out those plans were not justified by the circumstances and conditions then existing. To the first claim that the troops on shore were without provisions or ammunition, it needs only to be stated that ample supplies of both for thirty days could have been landed in one-half the time given to re-embarking the troops—about 3,500—which were taken off that night. To the claim that the troops on shore could not maintain their position against the large force of the enemy in their front, he had the assurance of Admiral Porter that the fleet could hold the position and give them complete protection. The opinion of Admiral Porter was supported by the fact that not one of the naval vessels left the station, nor did one of the frail transports waiting to carry the troops north leave its anchorage in front of the beach until all the stranded troops were taken on board Tuesday afternoon.

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